

The Arab Spring**The Role of ICTs**

Nextopia? Beyond Revolution 2.0¹

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Research on the impact of the internet in the Middle East has been dominated by a focus on politics and the public sphere, and oscillated between the hope for “revolutionary” change and the admission that regime stability in the region has not easily been unsettled by media revolutions alone. Obsession with the new and with latest technologies has helped to obscure more long-term sociocultural developments. This contribution is a plea for a shift of paradigm: to study more seriously the social and cultural effects of Internet and mobile phone use; to find out what impact the use of these media has on conceptions of the individual and its role in the construction of knowledge and values; and to determine how these dynamics are embedded in more long-term historical developments promoting a greater role for the individual vis-à-vis established authorities.

Revolution Through the Ever -Latest Technology?

“If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet.” This is what Wael Ghonim, Google executive and Facebook activist, told CNN on February 11, 2011, the day Hosni Mubarak resigned as President of Egypt. If you want to know “what’s next” after the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, “ask Facebook” (Cooper, 2011). Wael Ghonim’s statement is illustrative for the great hopes for liberation and democratization that have driven much of what has been published for over a decade now on the impact of the use of the Internet in the Middle East. These hopes for liberation and democratization have often been cast in the mode of “revolution,” and a fascination with “revolutions” in technology has facilitated the impetus to discover the “revolutionary” effects that the technology might have on state and society. One of the preeminent journals in the field, *Arab Media & Society*, was created in 2007 with the proclaimed goal of “Reporting a revolution” (Pintak, 2007). Granted, those who *unreservedly* believe in the power of

¹ This article has its origin in a presentation to the Seventh International Conference on Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication, Vancouver, Canada, June 15–18, 2010 (Sudweeks et al., 2010, pp. 187–197). A revised and updated version was given as keynote address to the workshop “Between Everyday Life and Political Revolution: The Social Web in the Middle East,” Naples, March 21, 2011. Together with other contributions to this workshop, it is scheduled to appear in print in a special issue of *Oriente Moderno*, 90/1, 2011. I wish to thank the conference participants and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback. The issue raised here has meanwhile also been addressed by Lynch (2010) and Christensen (2010, 2011).

new media to change the world are mostly activists or journalists.² But also much of the academic literature has oscillated between the search for revolutionary developments and the admission that all-too-high hopes for radical, techno-driven political change have not been borne out. But this admission has not killed the dream. It was rekindled in force by the "Twitter" and "Facebook revolutions" in Tunisia and Egypt in January and February 2011, and certainly has not died, despite the lack of revolutionary progress in Algeria, Sudan, or China, to name but a few countries where "Facebook revolutions" had been scheduled after the Tunisian model.

The belief that "revolutions" in communication technologies will lead to radical social and political change predates the Internet, of course. I could mention how television, back in the 1950s, was regarded as a harbinger of modernity (Lerner, 1958). And I could easily go back further, to radio, print and writing, to name but a few, and it would be obvious to most that technological inventions *have* indeed had tremendously important social and political consequences. But the term "communications revolution" really only seems to have gained currency in the 1990s, with satellite television and the Internet. When inventions in technology increasingly were dubbed, "revolutions," it became more and more common to think of their social and political implications as "revolutions" as well (Rheingold, 2002). In the Arab world, the satellite TV station *al-Jazeera*, established in 1996, became the first emblem of this trend. Toward the end of the 1990s, with Internet penetration in the region creeping toward the 1% mark, some placed their hopes for rapid change on the "information super-highway." But then the dot-com bubble burst; descriptions of the digital divide gained currency; and the information revolution lost its initial luster. It appeared, by 2004, that we were perhaps rather looking at "information without revolution" (Wheeler, 2010, p. 193; Wheeler, personal communication, 2004).

But change was *gonna* come. In 2005, blogging emerged as the new flame of hope in the Arab world.³ After blogs in neighboring Iran had blossomed in the wake of a state crackdown on the liberal press, and had shown the potential of the platform to undermine state control over information flows (Alavi, 2005), Egyptian bloggers took the lead in the Arab world by publishing reports on police brutality that not only aroused international attention, but also led to a court case and the conviction of two police officers for torture—an unprecedented event in the country (Wā'il 'Abbās, 2006b; Anonymous, 2007).⁴ In a further step, bloggers were decisive in reporting about mass sexual assault on women during a religious holiday in downtown Cairo in October 2006, with the police not intervening and other media keeping quiet for three days (Al Husseinī, 2006).⁵ Eventually, this led to greater public debate about sexual harassment, and in January 2010, a draft law to combat the problem was introduced to the Egyptian parliament (Abou

² Mona Eltahawy currently is one of the most eloquent of these; see <http://www.monaeltahawy.com>

³ Even podcasting, the latest craze in 2005, was not spared the question, "Will podcasting bring democracy to the Arab world?" "I think yes," answered Mohammed Ibahrine (2005), then a doctoral student of communication and political culture in Hamburg.

⁴ The two officers were released in 2009 after serving a reduced sentence, reinstated into active service. An appeal against their reinstatement was turned down in January 2010 (al-Qaranshāwī, 2010).

⁵ The story became public news after it was leaked impromptu on a popular satellite TV talk show (*al-Āshira masā'an*, on DreamTV; see Wā'il 'Abbās, 2006a).

el-Magd, 2010; Amro Hassan, 2009). Across the region, governments demonstrated their nervousness by cracking down harder on bloggers. Meanwhile, the “blogging revolution” (Loewenstein, 2008) failed to topple a single régime, and by 2008, David Faris noted “a fatigue with Egyptian blogging” that he attributed to the hyper-prominence of a few (three!) bloggers which made it “difficult for new voices to be heard.”⁶

Again, however, a savior had already appeared on the horizon: “Social networking sites where 12-year-old girls trade make-up secrets have become breeding grounds for revolution,” the co-editor of *Arab Media & Society* declared (Pintak, 2008). Facebook became “the next generation” platform and was regarded as the new way out that “might work better” than political parties for organizing social action, since, allegedly, it was more community-oriented, not least because it reduced the transaction costs for group-formation (Faris, 2008). This new enthusiasm was ignited by what became known in Egypt as the “Facebook Party,” founded, or so it was reported, by the “Facebook Girl.” Where traditional political parties had failed, where blogging fatigue had set in, Facebook groups were going to succeed, even if the people behind them were unaware of the momentous change the researcher was uncovering: “revolutions without revolutionaries.” “Esraa Abdel Fattah probably had no idea she was going to create a global phenomenon when she started a Facebook group in March of 2008” (Faris, 2008). The group⁷—membership of which exploded to over 70,000 in a few weeks, or almost 10% of all Egyptians on Facebook at the time—was calling for solidarity with the April 6 strike planned by workers in Egypt’s largest public sector textile company in al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā. The workers’ strike—the largest in a series of labor actions that Egypt had witnessed for years—was suppressed by security forces. The Facebook strike—which had called on people to stay at home—was interpreted as a success by eager commentators. A few critical voices pointed out that it was not entirely clear whether Cairo streets were emptier than usual on April 6 due to a sandstorm, combined with people’s fear of ending up in confrontations with the police. The government was wary enough of the new platform to arrest the Facebook Girl and push her into public submission. Pro-government papers published an avalanche of articles denouncing Facebook as undermining the good morale of the Egyptian people. But activists themselves knew better. In particular, Ḥusām al-Ḥamalāwī (*Ṣarabawī*) of the International Socialist Tendency pointed out that it was grassroots movement on the ground, rather than a mouse click on Facebook, that accounted for the making or breaking of a successful strike (al-Ḥamalāwī, 2008c). And he was proven right faster than he may have wanted. In the wake of their April 6 elation, Facebook activists called for a strike on May 4, President Mubarak’s 80th birthday. When that call went unheeded, research concluded that “[t]he trouble with relying on past successes in social activism is that it often does not work the same way the second time around” (Faris, 2008). A year later, in 2009, the “Facebook Revolution” was declared dead: “Facebook activism is now dismissed as useless at best, and the failure of the April 6th group to engender a lasting political movement has come to symbolize the futility of even trying” (Faris, 2009). The “groups” that were celebrated in 2008 as the Web 2.0 improvement on political parties due to the low transactions costs of forming them were now derided as “engender[ing] extraordinary low levels of commitment” (ibid.). The

⁶ The three bloggers were Hossam el-Hamalawy (<http://www.arabawy.org>), Wael Abbas (<http://misrdigital.blogspot.com>), and Nora Younis (<http://norayounis.com>).

⁷ “April 6 Youth Movement” (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=9973986703>).

prominent Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey described Facebook activism, in 2009, as a “form of masturbatory self-congratulating cyber activism that doesn’t really cost you any time or effort.”

Again, however, a new technology platform gave rise to “some hope.” The failure of April 6 was only the “end of the beginning,” for Facebook was a mere digression: “[The] focus on Facebook also appears to have missed the apparent shift of online dissent from blogs to Twitter” (Faris, 2009). Twitter had already been noted in the aftermath of the April 6, 2008, events when an American student, James Buck, twittered his way out of police custody in Maḥallā. “Twitter Saves Man From Egyptian Justice” was the headline on TechCrunch, the world’s leading blog on Web 2.0 technologies; CNN then helped to spread the news to the whole world (Arrington, 2008; Simon, 2008). Hardly anyone commented on the fact that it was only the U.S. citizen Buck, with legal help organized by his home university UC Berkeley, who was released from the police station—his Egyptian translator stayed behind, along with 42 others who had been arrested during the demonstrations. Even the otherwise skeptical Ḥusām al-Ḥamalāwī, on whose blog news of Buck’s arrest was published two minutes after the original tweet (al-Ḥamalāwī, 2008a), excitedly exclaimed: “The Revolution will be Twitterized!” (al-Ḥamalāwī, 2008b).⁸ The dream of the “Twitter revolution” (Micek & Whitlock, 2008) materializing in politics was rekindled first in Moldova (Morozov, 2009b), then again in Iran in 2009. Internet guru Clay Shirky (2009) declared: “[T]his is it. The big one. This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media.” Here we have it again, the “global stage,” the “global phenomenon” that Egypt’s Facebook Girl was said to have created. But note that, more than about actual events on the ground in Iran, Clay Shirky was excited about how “the whole world is watching,” i.e., about how Twitter allowed international media users the breathless feeling of receiving and forwarding minute-by-minute updates on unfolding events. Revolution here ran in danger of being reduced to a mere media event, while the actual régimes were not revolved from power. While people in New York cafés were forwarding tweets that gave them the thrilled feeling of partaking in a revolution, Iranian conservatives tightened their grip on power using YouTube videos and other Internet evidence to identify and arrest opposition activists. Critics therefore concluded that the Twitter revolution was mostly America’s Twitter revolution, or a boon to Twitter’s business plan (Forte, 2009). Evgeny Morozov, who (in spite of being a critic of techno-determinism and cyber-utopianism; see Morozov, 2009a) had been the one responsible for coining events in Moldova a “Twitter revolution,” subsequently became so disillusioned that he published *The Net Delusion* (Morozov, 2011a), warning that Western obsession with promoting democracy by digital means could backfire, as authoritarian governments could use the Internet to hone their surveillance techniques, disseminate cutting-edge propaganda, and pacify their populations with digital entertainment.

And then it happened. Again. A “Twitter revolution” in Tunisia; a “Facebook revolution” in Egypt. And this time, it was for real. Presidents did leave, régimes were changing, if grudgingly and all the while trying to preserve as much of the *ancien régime* as possible. And while this was still ongoing, one of the public faces of the Egyptian revolution,⁹ Wael Ghonim, updated the old concept to its Web 2.0 incarnation:

⁸ Repeated the year after by Andrew Sullivan, (2009) who exclaimed with regard to Iran, “The revolution will be twittered.”

⁹ I am using the term “revolution” here because it has been adopted by the actors themselves, and because it can be justified in its broad meaning of “any and all instances in which a state or a political

"This is Revolution 2.0. No one was a hero, because everyone was a hero." Like Wikipedia, "everyone" was collaborating in the Egyptian "Revolution 2.0," contributing in small or big ways, and at the end of the day, "from just an idea that sounded crazy," just like they had built "the largest encyclopedia in the world," people created "one of the most inspiring stories in the history of mankind." Revolution 2.0 had "completely changed" a country and a people that "for thirty years had been on a downhill," where "everything was going bad."

Yet, nothing was happening. . . . The reason why everyone was silent was . . . the psychological barrier of fear. . . . And that psychological barrier of fear has worked for so many years. And here comes the Internet. Technology. Blackberry. SMS. It's helping all of us to connect. Platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook were helping us a lot, because they basically gave us the impression that, "Wow — I'm not alone!"

And thus, the Egyptian "everyone" showed that "the power of the people is stronger than the people in power" (Wael Ghonim, 2011).

Wael Ghonim wasn't just anybody. He was Google's Middle East marketing director, and his detention and the emotional interview he gave after his release on a popular talk show on Dream TV February 7, 2011, turned him into a celebrity. In June 2010, he had been one of those who set up the Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said" that quickly grew into the biggest Egyptian political protest group on Facebook and became one of the most important public platforms mobilizing for the January 25 demonstrations that marked the beginning of the end of the Mubarak régime.¹⁰ His excitement about "Revolution 2.0," his conviction that "if you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet," is typical for many online activists. They are convinced that what they are doing *is* changing the world in a radical, unprecedented way. They are looking back on 30 years in which "nothing was happening," and seeing that now, with their activities, with their online activities, things *are* happening. They look back on the 30 years that often is their own age, 30 years in which they grew up feeling that old régimes, led by old men, were denying them every realistic option of real participation in determining how their countries, and often their lives, were run. The old leaders were posing as father figures who knew best, father figures who were protecting their people from an immaturity that would lead to chaos if the people were allowed to rule, if unfettered democracy would be put in place. And for those who were not convinced, the paternalistic régime had a variety of sanctions in store, police brutality being just one of them. The 30-year-olds had grown up beneath this "barrier of fear," this *ḥāḡiz al-khawf*: "If I speak up, I will be beaten up." I could end up like Khaled Said. So the experience that using the Internet and Facebook to mobilize against police corruption and brutality could be successful was a mighty one. It is therefore

regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a popular movement in an irregular, extraconstitutional and/or violent fashion" (Goodwin, 2001, p. 9).

¹⁰ "Kullinā Khālid Saīd" (<http://www.facebook.com/EIShaheed>). Another important Facebook page (although attracting considerably less "likes") was "6th of April Youth Movement—Ḥarakat Shabāb 6 Ibrīl" (<http://www.facebook.com/shabab6april>), where, starting on January 18, 2011, Asmā' Mahfūz posted a number of videos calling for mass demonstrations on January 25, videos that have been regarded as being one of the important mobilization factors for the demonstration. See also Kirkpatrick and Sanger (2011).

understandable that Wael Ghonim and many Internet activists are profoundly sincere in claiming that it was the Internet which broke this barrier of fear, that it was the Internet which had brought them freedom.

A Preoccupation with the "New" and the "Political"

But in observing and understanding this excitement, we shouldn't forget that we have seen this before; we have seen high hopes and deep disappointment before, alternating in rapid succession. Remember how, in 2009, Facebook activism was "dismissed as useless at best" by the very people who only a year earlier had hailed its revolutionary potential? Remember how the man who saw a "Twitter revolution" in Moldova became convinced, a year later, that we were all in danger of falling victim to a *Net Delusion*?

The fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian régimes has led to a fresh flurry of exchanges on the role of the Internet, and in particular the role of "social media," in these events. Cyber-skeptics Morozov and Gladwell (2010, 2011) were derided as hopelessly yesteryear: "See? Here *is* your Facebook revolution!" The skeptics replied: "We never said that social media did not play a role; we just pointed out that it is a *mere tool*, a tool that can be used by protesters and governments alike, and where big brother may turn out to prevail in the end!" To which the other side retorted: "But we never said that that social media alone can bring about a revolution; it is a tool, but a highly important tool that changes the dynamics of what's going on on the ground." And so this debate continued for a while between two sides that were partly working with simplistic caricatures of their opponents' arguments, ignoring the finer points made by the other side (Morozov, 2011b). To an extent, the debate between "cyber-skeptics" and "cyber-utopians" reflects the yo-yo pattern of alternating hope and disappointment that appears to be a characteristic thread in how we have come to look at media impact in the Middle East. I see two kinds of problems with this. The first one was pointed out by a number of prominent media researchers in a report in August 2010:

Do new media have real consequences for contentious politics . . . ? The sobering answer is that, fundamentally, no one knows [because to] this point, little research has sought to estimate the causal effects of new media in a methodologically rigorous fashion, or to gather the rich data needed to establish causal influence. Without rigorous research designs or rich data, partisans of all viewpoints turn to anecdotal evidence and intuition (Aday et al., 2010, p. 5)

In other words, we haven't come past the stage of hypothesis building. In the absence of more systematic research, cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics will continue to throw anecdotes at one another to demonstrate how effective or not social media is in bringing about revolutions. And so here, to put research about the political effects of new media on firmer ground, we need more systematic data. As Aday et al. (2010) suggest, research should focus on five distinct levels of analysis, investigating how new media may

- (1) transform (or not) individuals' attitudes and willingness to engage in political action;
- (2) "mitigate or exacerbate group conflict";
- (3) "facilitate collective action";
- (4) help régimes to better spy on and control their citizens; and
- (5) "garner international attention."

The other problem that I want to point out, however, beyond this call for more systematic research on media's impact on politics, is precisely that most of us continue to be preoccupied with *politics*, with the question, "Do new media have real consequences for contentious politics?" It may sound strange in these revolutionary times, but this preoccupation with politics has slanted our understanding of the role of the Internet in the Middle East. If we look back at the main focus of the research that has been published so far in this area, we find that much of it was initially driven by a hope that the Internet would be a decisive factor in bringing about *political change* in the region. When such change was slow to materialize, research turned its attention to the "*public sphere*." As Marc Lynch, one of the foremost Middle East media scholars, recommended back in 2007, "Rather than focus on whether blogs alone can deliver democracy or a political revolution, analysts should explore the variety of ways in which blogs might transform the dynamics of Arab public opinion and political activism."

But this focus on politics, and the quest for revolutionary effects of new media that is often underlying it, limits our perspective. The horizon of our research gets limited by a preoccupation with the *new*, exemplified in "new" technologies and "new" media, and a preoccupation with the *political*. "Will the Internet, will blogging, will podcasting, Facebook, or Twitter bring democracy?" It is almost as if we are continuously searching for political utopia through the next generation of technology. A "nextopia," if I may borrow the expression from a Swedish marketing professor (Dahlén, 2008). Long-term developments reaching far back into history, and private and personal dynamics, tend to fall off the radar in this view.

Taking the Social Dimension of Social Media Seriously

Due to the focus on *political* change, and the quest for political revolution, the influence of the Internet in the *social and cultural* domains has been much less in the limelight.¹¹ One finds occasional observations on how mobile communication and social networking threaten established models for appropriate gender relations, and recently, we have begun to see work on how literature (*belles-lettres*) fares when published and consumed on the Internet. But overall, Walter Armbrust's (2007) plea has so far remained largely unheeded: "The last thing I would like to see is a repetition of the sterile debate over the political effects of al-Jazeera carried out in academic analyses of blogs." An "old and familiar concern for politics" structures much of Middle Eastern studies, including media studies, and has come "at the expense of the rest of the content" that is being communicated on the media. At a minimum—and still with an eye for public politics—Armbrust calls for looking at the Internet "as a new phase in a long evolution in hierarchies of authority," and asks us to investigate its complex effects on the social construction of

¹¹ A notable exception is Braune (2008).

authority in the region. These remarks are of prime importance if we want to address what he termed a "stagnation in the study of Middle Eastern media."

What we need is not only to acknowledge, but also to take seriously the fact that the Internet and social media are used for much more, and primarily for other things than, political activism or citizen journalism. While researchers dismissed Facebook after the failures of 2009, the platform has been steadily rising in popularity. In 2010, it became the second most popular website after Google across the Arab world—just as in the rest of the world.¹² And all the revolutionary fervor notwithstanding, it is *primarily for maintaining and extending social relations* and for *entertainment* that Arabs go on Facebook—just as in the rest of the world. To maintain and extend social relations and seek entertainment has been a prime reason for starting to use the Internet long before Facebook; in the old days, it was common to hear complaints that Internet use was "80% chatting," or cliché juxtapositions such as that, while the West made good use of the Internet for learning and business, Arabs were wasting it for entertainment (Sāmiḥ M. Fahmī, 2006; arablirarian, 2007). Who did such dismissive ideas come from? It was people of authority—parents, educators, "responsible" journalists and researchers, police officers, etc.¹³ My point here is not that the observation that a lot of people were using the Internet for chatting and entertainment was *wrong*; it is to highlight the dismissive attitude toward this type of "more futile" (Salvatore, 2011) use. This is an attitude that attaches greater importance to the "serious," the public, the political than it does to the private and the personal. It is an attitude that may be shared by people in authority, activists in opposition, and political scientists alike, and one that is betrayed even in innocuous statements such as this quotation from an Egyptian blogger: "In most of other Arab countries blogs are personal not activist, Egypt is exceptional."¹⁴ Is this really a correct description of the Egyptian blogosphere? I posit that it would be more precise to say that, in Egypt, the politically active bloggers have gained more political attention and weight than in many other Arab countries, but that does not mean that the majority of blogs there are activist. Courtney Radsch must have realized this herself when she distinguished three phases in the development of the Egyptian blogosphere: After experimenting with

¹² This is according to Alexa.com. In December 2010, Facebook was the most popular web site in Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan and Sudan, and the second-most popular after Google in Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Bahrain, the UAE, and Yemen. In Kuwait and Qatar, it came third after Google and YouTube; in Saudi-Arabia, fourth after Google, YouTube, and Windows Live. In Oman, it was pushed to rank six by the new Omani discussion forum Sablat 'Umān; and in Syria, where it only was available via proxy from 2007–2011, it had risen to rank 7 (up from 10 in February 2010). In Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Sudan, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, and the UAE, its ranking had advanced since February 2010. The publicity around Facebook during the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt gave a huge additional boost to Facebook's popularity; by June 2011, it ranked number one in Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Kuwait; number two after Google in Syria, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and Yemen; and number three (after Google and YouTube) in Saudi Arabia. In Egypt alone, Facebook user numbers jumped from five to over seven million between February and May 2011, according to socialbakers.com. See also Eldon (2011).

¹³ Hofheinz, interviews during field work in Egypt and Morocco, 2002–2005.

¹⁴ Egyptian blogger Abd Al Moneim Mahmoud, quoted in Radsch (2008).

the new medium (2003–2005), activists exploited its full potential in particularly propitious political circumstances (2005–2006); when these circumstances changed and the user base grew, the blogosphere after 2006 diversified and fragmented into a wide variety of circles that included “citizen journalists, non-denominational activists, leftists, Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists, culture and art enthusiasts, open source technology activists, English language political commentary and strictly personal.” However, even as she acknowledged that blogging had become “commonplace,” Radsch continued to focus almost exclusively on the activist part of the blogosphere, thereby cementing the skewed image that the blogosphere is mainly about political and media activism.

And this is the problem. We acknowledge that chat, blogs, and Facebook, not to speak of mobile phones, are increasingly becoming “commonplace” in the Middle East. But in our research, we largely focus on a small subset of activist users while ignoring what chatting and Facebooking do to the majority. We have often despaired over the glacial pace of political reform (al-‘Umrān, 2008), but we do not know nearly enough about what the Internet does to the dynamics between children and their parents, between younger and older generations, between individuals and authorities. Here is a quotation taken from the world of literature to illustrate what Facebook does far away from politics. A publisher complained to BBC Arabic:

Dealing with the new writers, there’s a problem with them. But do the problems get addressed in the proper way? [...] In the old days [...] one would go to the publishing house, and the director of the publishing house, and if there was a problem, one would talk to the director. And if one couldn’t come to a solution with the director, then one would try and figure out what other options one had. But now we no longer have any of that. Now everyone as soon as they have a problem, they always go and put it on Facebook! (Yaḥyā Hāshim, 2009)

A Change of Attitude: Individuals vs. Authority

And this is the crucial point. It is the *attitude* that changes, the attitude of individual users toward authority, a disregard for the long chain of authority, for established hierarchies that used to structure decision making. We find this attitude all over the Arabic Internet; it is deplored by people in authority and positively asserted by ever more young users themselves. In the realm of religion, to take another field, more and more people are asserting—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—their right to question and dismiss religious authorities. Take, for example, the “global mufti” Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, one of the most high-profile and popular Islamic scholars of our time (a position he owes not least to the satellite TV station al-Jazeera) (Skovgaard-Petersen & Gräf, 2009). He may be very popular, but his *authority* is in no way undisputed. “You mentioned Sh. Qardawy’s statement. Who is Sh. Qardawy? Isn’t he one like many others, since we have no clergy in Islam?” (Sameh Arab, 2001). Such attitudes are increasingly expressed as a matter of course on the Internet. “Praise be to God—religion has been established by God and not by al-Sha’rāwī or al-Qaraḏāwī [the two leading Islamic TV scholars since 1980], and if al-Qaraḏāwī and al-Sha’rāwī err it doesn’t mean that the whole Islamic community follows them in their error” (Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Khāliq, 2009). As Al-Qaraḏāwī himself bemoans, there is a

. . . tragic disappearance of wise and knowledgeable *ulama* capable of properly basing their arguments on accurate testimony from the Qur'ān and the Sunna. Their absence has given rise to inexpert, unqualified religious scholars and to disingenuous clerics . . . Under such anarchy anyone can sell himself as an Islamic sheikh, and such men have begun to give a religious verdict without scruple even on the most complex issues. (Polka, 2003, p. 7)

Authority is threatened by increasingly being called into question, not by fellow authorities, but essentially by "everyone." "*Kullu man dabba wa-habba aṣḥaba yatakallamu fī 'l-dīn*"—every Tom, Dick and Harry have come to dabble in things religious, as critics complain (Yāsir, 2009). If everyone can read the Scriptures, everyone can use them to measure presumed religious authorities by the standards of these Scriptures—in practice, that is, by one's own understanding of these standards. And this is what is happening on Internet fora every day. The attitude coming to expression there is one of no longer unquestioningly accepting what authorities decide, but checking for oneself, coming to one's own conclusions, making one's own decisions. And this attitude is fostered by the structure of interaction on the Internet. There, it is the individual user who is doing the selection, who is choosing what to see and what not to see, choosing what to forward and what not to forward. This may be purely copy and paste, and if you will, completely unoriginal, but this copy and paste is what is increasingly important in today's attention economy, and it does shape the cultural horizons of people, the horizons under which they act. What news they read, what they discuss, what they like, and what they think is authoritative is increasingly informed by what links are forwarded to them by their friends on Facebook, or by what flies by them on Twitter.

Therefore, these arenas are places that we need more research on as far as Middle Eastern users are concerned in order better to understand the dynamics going on there. But we can already see some structural elements that are inherent in the code that, itself, structures communication on the Internet. Since it is individual users who do the picking and choosing and forwarding, they thereby become more important elements in the construction and reconstruction of cognitive and normative content—content pertaining to their social worlds, to religion, to culture, and also to politics. Even those who are not adding their own voice, but merely picking and forwarding, thereby become more important actors in the social construction of knowledge than the likes of them have been before. "I'm a maker—not a taker" is a slogan spread by the "Life Makers" campaign of the televangelist 'Amr Khālid, star among the young. This widely successful campaign draws on and aims to strengthen the attitude that "I can actually make a difference"; I can change things, at least in my own immediate circle, and the first thing I can change is the attitude that we can't change anything anyhow. This attitude has grown for years on Internet fora, even among those who were not planning revolutions but only calling for a greener neighborhood or a little more say in their own lives. And of course, this idea that "Yes, we can change things," got a huge boost in the early months of 2011, when political revolution actually did happen, even though, in the true yo-yo spirit of hope and despair, no one had expected it to happen so "soon."¹⁵

¹⁵ See al-'Umrān (2008, 2011); Asmā' Maḥfūz (2011); Haykal (2011).

The Weight of Individuals: A Generational Evolution

Prior to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, I had urged us to take seriously the metaphor of “*the next generation*.” After all, a breathless focus on the latest and newest technologies, often coupled with only scarcely taking into account the historical dynamics that predated the emergence of the “new media” in the 1990s, works to obscure more long-term evolutionary developments. These are developments that happen over many generations, human generations. And what happens through generational change certainly is reflected by, and may be propelled by, new media technologies, but it has many more dimensions to it (Hofheinz, 2005). As such, I have argued that what we need is to look beyond the latest in technologies and politics when it comes to assessing the influence that the Internet and mobile communication have in the Middle East. And even though we have now witnessed a revolutionary moment, carried in part by social media, I still believe that we need to look beyond the momentary excitement of “Revolution 2.0.” Yes, it will be important to analyze how Facebook, SMS, and Twitter (not to forget blogs, discussion fora, and landline phones) were used to organize and mobilize demonstrators, to circumvent state control, and to enlist a pan-Arab and global public imaginary. But the heyday of revolutionary activism will pass; everyday life will return, and Internet use will become less “revolutionary” again. When that happens, however, it will remain just as important to look at what “everyday” Internet use does to its users, to look at what growing up with the Internet does to the dynamics between younger and older generations. How does it help to increase the relative weight of communication with peers, and how does that strengthen more critical or distanced attitudes toward established authorities? Therefore, I would like to see more research investigating my anecdote-based hypothesis that Internet users, implicitly but often also consciously expressed, develop feelings of

- (1) being in greater control over what they want to read and look at;
- (2) being entitled to judge sources of information and authorities; and
- (3) having the right to express themselves publicly—to be active participants in opinion-forming.

If such attitudes are gaining ground, then we are looking at a development towards a *greater role for individual users* (or at least a greater self-perceived role) in the constitution of factual and normative knowledge.¹⁶ This is structurally reinforced through the mode of interaction with friends and peers in social

¹⁶ And lest we forget: These individual users are not one-dimensional entities, but human beings with multiple, negotiated, and performed identities. If we take this seriously, we need to make analytical room for the fact that Muslims, for example—and this includes Islamists—do not only act as Muslims. This may sound like a truism, but in practice, our research often focuses too exclusively on the religious dimension of actors in the religious field, and thus risks over-simplifying a more complex reality. Take, for example, the 16-year-old Egyptian who was among the first to post a video of a TV talk show where the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar was condemned for wanting to forbid the face veil. Previously, this young man had commented positively on romantic music videos (<http://www.youtube.com/user/mastk333>). This is in line with young users on Facebook who have no qualms declaring themselves fans of both Mohammed and Madonna.

networks, including social networking sites, and it means that the social self-evidence of established authorities becomes more volatile. Of course, authorities have, at all times, had to construct their authoritativeness through social processes; they have had to negotiate and legitimate their authority and prove it to the social groups that they wanted to influence. Today, the “crowds” they need to take into account are becoming larger and faster than ever before. In other words, the general fact that crowds and authorities are in a mutually dependent dynamics has not changed, but the *weight* of crowds, and of the individuals that make up the crowds, has grown. Thus, with the increasing spread of social media and mobile communication, the social networks of knowledge construction are becoming not only vastly bigger and quicker and less limited by space and time constraints than they have been before, but also more of a threat to established authorities.¹⁷

A Development with Roots in the 18th Century

Finally, when we look at what the Internet does to the “next generation” in human terms, we should not only have a longer breath but also a *longer historical perspective* than has hitherto been the rule in Internet studies in the Middle East. Evolutions—which, as I am arguing, may be more important in the long run than revolutions—take time. They happen over the course of generations. And here, I am not only talking about the future. I am talking about dynamics that can be traced back over the past three centuries of Islamic intellectual history. The deconstruction of scholastic hierarchies and the concomitant *promotion of a greater role for each individual believer* is something that goes back long before the Internet. It began to spread in earnest in the 17th and 18th centuries when Muslim preachers (using, by the way, the new technologies of the time, like pamphlets and vernacular language) tore down a key concept that had dominated the conception of religious authority for five centuries: that “the believer must be in the hands of his teacher like a corpse in the hands of the one who washes it,” and therefore obey and comply, even if the teacher gives an order ostensibly in conflict with the prescriptions of the Divine Law, the *sharī‘a*. This was no longer acceptable to 18th-century reformers who worked to spread the idea that every believer had the right and duty to hold up presumed authorities to the standards of the Scriptures, and who therefore encouraged everyone to go back to the Scriptures instead of relying on secondary sources. It dates from that time that growing numbers of people have actually read the Qur’ān and held up the Scriptures against established authority (Hofheinz, 1996). Thus, what happens on the Internet today can be seen in part as a continuation of a much older story, where individuals are encouraged to judge authorities by a generalized standard that is accessible, in principle, for everyone. Placed in such a wider historical context, the Internet may lose some of its “revolutionary” mystique—but this may be just what is needed to gain a more sober understanding of its impact in the Middle East.

¹⁷ We must take care not to confuse the fact that the new crowds constitute a threat to established, “self-evident” authorities with a “flat” nature of the networks constituted via social media. In fact, Internet networks, like many other networks, are generally regarded as “scale-free” networks, where roughly 20% of members get 80% of the attention through “preferential attachment” of the many to the few who are most prominent.

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